

U.S. Alternative National Military Strategies

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The U.S. Army War College and the Georgetown University Center for Peace and Security Studies along with its National Security Studies Program cosponsored a conference in Washington, DC, on September 21, 2000, to examine the issues that will shape future American defense policy. Discussion panels were structured to identify the questions, issues, and schisms likely to shape the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review. Among the 160 attendees registered for the conference were representatives from the Quadrennial Defense Review offices for all the Services and the Joint Staff, as well as defense experts from other government agencies, private industry, and academia.

The conference consisted of four panels. The first session discussed what the focus should be for U.S. defense planners for the next 10-20 years. The second looked at the issues involved in transforming the military and Department of Defense (DoD) for that future. The third panel debated how the near-term U.S. defense budget should be allocated for force structure, manpower, and modernization. The last analyzed what the next National Military Strategy should be. This brief summary highlights the salient points raised and discussed during the meeting. The U.S. Army War College (and Georgetown University) will publish more comprehensive report later this year.

Planning Focus.

Opinions about the future direction of U.S. military strategy are primarily driven by visions of what the threat will be. It is difficult to visualize the rise of a true peer competitor in the foreseeable future, but aggressive states like Iraq or North Korea still could launch a major theater war (MTW). For some analysts, the current 2 MTW strategy for allocating standing forces makes sense to deter such threats, especially since we will not have the time or the surge production capability to mobilize for them. The 2 MTW force structure requirements can also be justified by focusing on vital interests, such as deterring attacks on the United States or preventing the emergence of hostile hegemonies in Europe or Asia.

Other commentators disagree with this focus, instead seeing future threats coming from failed states or disputes over scarce resources such as water. This would require a far different military strategy that would entail more cooperation with and support for civilian agencies. Total military force requirements might be about the same, but organizations would have to be restructured to deal with political and ethnic violence within states, and the growing cooperation of terrorists and criminals. High technology might not be appropriate in such situations. Instead, military units would have to be more expeditionary and broadly focused to support diplomatic, economic, and cultural initiatives as well as combat. For these missions, thinking people will be more important than any technology. And at the far extreme on this issue are those who see a less threatening world requiring fewer military forces of any kind.

Defense Transformation Issues.

These same visions of coming threats, combined with the desire to take advantage of the technological advances that are changing warfare, have fueled a drive within the DoD, Congress, and the defense community to transform the Services. Again, differences of opinion were evident as to the direction this process should take, and to what degree significant alterations are possible. Debate centered on the speed, depth, and drivers of change. Proponents of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) believe that U.S. forces will have to be equipped and structured very differently to take full advantage of the possibilities of new technology. If we do not, our potential adversaries will, greatly increasing their options for similar or asymmetric strategies. As one panelist remarked, Access problems are soon coming to a theater near you. Transformation is therefore essential to ensure continued American military superiority to meet all threats with acceptable risk.

However, supporters of this process see many barriers to achieving meaningful change. Our current military superiority robs the process of urgency, while high operational tempo distracts us from it. A cultural tendency in the military towards zero defects discourages risking failure in experimentation. Service duplication and rivalry inhibit the development of truly new ideas. Perhaps the most serious limiting factor will be that any transformation will have to occur within current budget constraints. Hard tradeoffs will have to be made between research and development of new technologies and the maintenance of old ones, as well as with recapitalization and procurement. Neither presidential candidate is really promising to increase defense spending enough to meet all those needs. Also, claims for the pace of technological advancement may be exaggerated, with only a few areas with a real potential for revolutionary change. Thus, some attendees argued that the tools to radically alter our military in the next decade might not exist yet, and a meaningful transformation might not be possible at this time.

Force Structure, Manpower, and Modernization.

The discussion about factors limiting transformation set the stage for the next panel dealing with budget issues. Nearly everyone at the conference agreed that there is a mismatch between current and proposed defense spending and the force required by American national security strategy. However, it was evident that analysts disagree strongly about what should be done about the problem. Those who believe the defense budget can be lower argue that threats are decreasing, shaping should be performed by the State Department and not by DOD, and that there is no point in buying new equipment with so many technological advances just over the horizon. Those who advocate this position believe that current heavy forces are strategically irrelevant, and the Army in particular should take note of current business trends to develop more flexible and smaller tactical units.

In contrast, both presidential candidates have pledged to raise defense spending, and many commentators believe there may be as much as a 50-75 billion dollar shortfall. There is consensus that the United States is going to remain engaged in the world, retain a spectrum of capabilities, and maintain a qualitative edge over potential enemies, but we have chosen not to pay enough for those capabilities. Major problems exist in procurement, and necessary modernization programs will be very expensive. Transformation will be threatened by the costs of maintaining old equipment. Historically, we have committed a larger share of our Gross Domestic Product to defense than we are now, and money is available to raise the DOD budget.

In between these positions are those who caution that there is bipartisan agreement that defense spending should be somewhere around 300 billion dollars. They agree that procurement expenditures must be raised along with those for research and development, but there will have to

be tradeoffs by slowing modernization or reducing force structure. Historical trends are leading towards smaller, more capital-intensive military forces, and that is what our goal should be.

The Big Picture: What Military Strategy Should Be.

The last panel provided a broad-brush analysis of the future direction of U.S. military strategy that also inspired a lively exchange with the audience. Many different positions were presented. Some claimed that the current focus on fighting major theater wars was unrealistic, and wanted increased priority to humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping. Others argued that without maintaining the capability to fight two MTWs the current deterrence gap would increase even more. Another argument was that decisionmakers were already trying to do all those things at once without properly balancing ends and means. Other commentators cautioned that the RMA and emphasis on force protection were altering military values in unforeseen ways and threatening the warrior ethic. Precise standoff weapons put our force at less risk but encourage American leaders and the public to believe that we can accomplish military goals without loss of life. Participants also discussed our reduced nuclear force, and whether it would really deter rogue states, especially if their leaders believe we would not attack their cities in retaliation. Attendees generally agreed that the world is increasingly embracing the liberal-democratic goals pursued by the United States for the last century, and whatever strategy the nation decides to adopt, it should be one that will maintain that momentum of progress.

One of the highlights of the gathering was the luncheon speech by General Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret). He provided his own views on the direction national security should be heading. He focused on two questions coming out of his own involvement in the readiness and transformation debates, Ready for what? and What needs to change? He speculated that we may need two kinds of military forces, one large and at a high level of readiness prepared to fight 2 MTWs, and another more flexible to handle less traditional missions.

Conclusions.

Concerning the focus of future planning, there appeared to be general agreement at the conference that the possibility of two MTWs has decreased, that there will be more small-scale contingencies in the future, and that we will retain our advantage in technology and emphasis on minimal casualties for quite a while. There was much less consensus on the next step. Some support retaining the ability to fight two MTWs despite their reduced probability of occurrence, simply because that represents the most dangerous threat or worst-case scenario. Others argue for a restructuring to meet more likely missions, or advocate reducing forces because there is no viable threat to U.S. interests.,P. ,p. Similarly, almost all attendees concurred that there is a need for the American military to change and adapt, and many supported a broad transformation. They also agreed that even with the modest budget increases proposed by both presidential candidates, continuing fiscal constraints will demand hard choices to establish priorities for defense spending. Attendees generally believed the future military strategy will probably remain some form of the current shape, respond, prepare construct. But opinions varied widely as to the direction and pace transformation should take, exactly how the defense budget should be spent, and what the proper emphasis for each of the three elements of the current security strategy should be.

While the conference did not achieve anything near consensus on the future course of American military strategy, it did effectively highlight the key issues that must be resolved to keep it on the right path. General Zinni's two questions frame important elements of the debate, looking

at threats and military capabilities in a very uncertain future. Concerning Ready for what? the process of balancing ends, ways, and means in the next decade will be complex and confrontational, involving sincere proponents of a wide range of views. Once decisionmakers have determined the goals they want military forces to accomplish, they must be willing to commit the resources to fund the required capabilities and structure, or else to set global priorities that will prevent overcommitment. Hard choices may have to be made between a focus on shaping or responding, between major wars or peacekeeping, between a commitment to new technology or maintaining current equipment. As for What needs to change? the Services face a challenge of achieving meaningful transformation that truly increases capabilities for future missions. This must be accomplished without raising risk, be within resource constraints, and invest in those technologies that offer the most potential for revolutionary change. In this quest for a new strategy the costs of failure in either the political or military arena could be catastrophic, resulting in unacceptable risk to the nation and its interests, and the loss of an opportunity to really create a New World Order reflecting liberal-democratic ideals.

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